

## Rural Crime from A Global Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Much of the research on rural crime has focused on the U.S. In recent years, however, there has been a dramatic increase in rural crime research in other regions of the world. This paper will report the results of a systematic review of rural crime research conducted outside of the United States. The review identifies common themes, including the manner in which rural is defined, the types of crime examined, and the methodology employed.

**Keywords:** rural crime, international

## Introduction

In the United States rural residents make up about 15 percent of the population, and globally the rural population constitutes about 46 percent of the world's population (World Health Organization, 2014). By any measure the number of people living in rural areas is large. Just as importantly, however, is that while most people live in urban areas, most places are rural. In the United States, for example, that 15 percent population figure covers 72 percent of the country's land area (Economic Research Service, 2014). Whether measured by the number of people or by the land area they occupy, rural is an important issue for study and rural crime is an important dimension of that issue.

Rural has practical utility regarding understanding crime and effectively responding to it. While the sheer number of crimes and criminals in urban areas simplifies the study of crime, the number of large urban areas is small compared to the number of rural areas. This large number of places includes wide variability on factors sometimes associated with crime. This wide variability makes the rural setting a good place to develop and test criminological theories and assumptions about crime (Donnermeyer, Barclay and Jobes 2002).

Rural areas vary widely one from another, whether their economies are based on agriculture, tourism, light manufacturing, service, or the extraction of natural resources. They vary widely in whether they have high or low levels of violence, and whether they are physically remote or adjacent to large urban centers. Rural areas vary in whether they are experiencing population growth or decline, and whether they have diverse or homogeneous ethnic and/or racial populations. Similarly, rural areas vary widely in the culture and customs that shape the operation of the criminal justice system.

An understanding of the forces that shape rural crime has important implications for understanding crime more generally. For example, theories that were developed utilizing urban settings don't always seem to apply equally well when applied to crime in rural areas. Weisheit and Wells (2005) found that variables traditionally associated with social disorganization theory accounted for a relatively high percentage of the variance in homicide rates in the largest urban areas. However, the ability of these variables to account for homicide rates declined precipitously as one examined progressively more rural areas. The variance explained by these indicators of traditional social disorganization theory dropped from .64 in the largest metropolitan areas to .17 in the most rural areas. When this happens the generalizability and ultimate utility of the theory is called into question. Further, it is not always clear what is meant by rural and what unit of analysis makes the most sense for rural. As Kaylen and Pridemore (2003, p. 920) have observed:

“Our results indicate that levels of social disorganization in rural and urban communities are not similarly associated with the common structural antecedents posited by social disorganization theory. This necessitates either a more general theory that better explains crime rates in both types of communities, or a rural-specific model.”

In short, there may be important ways in which rural crime and factors generating it are very different from crime in urban areas. These differences merit exploration and have implications for policy, practice, and theory.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Much of the research on rural crime has centered on the United States. That research suggests some of the ways in which rural crime and justice are different in rural and urban areas. The research also suggests that theories of crime developed utilizing what is known about crime in urban areas may not fit the rural setting.

Research based on data from the United States has proven interesting and has broadened our understanding of rural crime and of theories of crime. However, only about four percent of the world’s population lives in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014) and, as indicated above, the rural population is a much larger percentage of the population in the rest of the world compared with the United States (46 percent versus 15 percent). Further, the variability across rural areas within the United States that makes rural a valuable laboratory for the study of crime, is likely to be much greater when considering the global context. Although data from the United States have made considerable contributions to the study of rural crime, there has been a growing body of research in other countries. This study provides a systematic review of that research. A complete list of these international references can be found in Appendix A.

## **Methodology**

This is a systematic review of the literature on rural crime outside of the United States. The literature was identified by conducting on-line searches using Sociological Abstracts, the SocINDEX, PAIS International, and Criminal Justice Abstracts. The search was limited to journal articles published between January 2000 and October of 2014.<sup>2</sup> Search terms included “rural+crime” and was limited to English language articles. Articles on topics such as illicit drug use or drug treatment were included only if they specifically included a rural component. In addition, as articles were read the reference list of each article was checked for articles the electronic search might have missed.

Each identified article was read and coded on the following variables: Year of publication, page length, name of journal, country, number of countries included, how rural was defined, was

there a comparison of rural and urban, if there was a rural-urban comparison and if either had higher crime levels, number of methods used, the primary methodology, if a theory was applied and if so which theory, the primary crime type, the number of authors, and the last name and first initial of each author.

### Questions About Classifying

Like people, articles vary substantially one from another and not every one fits neatly into a distinct category. Deciding what to include proved a challenge. For example, an article about crime victimization in Namibia was excluded. It reported on the results of a national survey and in the article noted that the majority of the population lived in rural areas. However, the article did not further incorporate anything about rural in reporting its findings. It did include a brief mention of cattle theft but did so absent a discussion of the rural context. An article discussing the merits of a separate category of crime called conservation crime was excluded because there was no discussion of the rural nature of such crime. Other issues regarding categorizing also arose.

Watson's (2008) historical study of a woman who committed multiple infanticides was recorded as a violent crime rather than domestic violence. It was elected to include Häkkänen, Hurme and Liukkonen's (2007) study of homicide in Finland which reported on the disposal of bodies in rural areas, but did not elaborate on whether the offenses happened in rural or urban areas. In contrast, articles were included that did not explicitly identify their subjects as rural but did focus on farm crime or cattle theft. vanKempen's (2009) article title says the study is in rural Guatemala but their sample is 2/3 urban and there is no distinction between urban and rural in their analysis. Despite its title it was excluded. Sukhai's (2000) study of rural residents who move to urban areas in China and commit crimes there also was excluded.

There was also a code for the presence of a theory, but different authors tended to utilize different ideas of what constituted a theory. While it might seem obvious, it is not always clear when a theory is applied to a rural crime problem. For example, Sidebottom (2013) uses Clark's notion of CRAVE to explain why cattle might be targeted for theft. In using CRAVE he notes:

“To be clear, CRAVED was never intended to be a *theory* of offender target selection. Instead, it was developed as a target-centered model to emphasize the attributes that thieves tend to favor, namely items that are *concealable*, *removable*, *available*, *valuable*, *enjoyable*, and *disposable*.” (p. 198, emphasis in original).

Because the CRAVED model has much in common with routine activities it was recorded as such.

There were also unique examples of methodology. For example, Smith's (2004) "case story method" used a fictional case to tell a story about a real crime by creating a composite based on actual cases. White's (2012) article on rural land theft is a conceptual piece describing the problem globally, but was recorded as a literature review.

## Findings

As a result of the search process a total of 121 articles were found which addressed rural crime outside of the United States. A wide range of countries was represented among these articles. The final list included articles from 37 different countries, and a handful of studies (n=5) that used global data. Antarctica was the only continent not represented in the studies. Australia and the United Kingdom were tied for the largest number of articles at 24 articles each (19.8% each). Next in frequency was South Africa with 11 articles (9.1%). The remainder were scattered across the globe from Bangladesh, to India, to Tanzania, to Pakistan.

The articles were found in a wide range of journals. These 121 articles were published in 81 different journals, including such outlets as *The International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research* and *The Journal of Technology Transfer*. The most published journal in the area was *Acta Criminologica* with seven articles followed by *The International Journal of Rural Criminology*, in which six of the 121 articles were published. Three journals had four articles with the remaining journals having fewer, usually only one article.

Not only was a wide range of journals represented, but so was a wide range of authors. A total of 277 authors and co-authors were represented in the study, with about two-thirds of the articles (66.1%) having only one or two authors. No one author dominated the literature.

## Defining Rural

The first issue was how rural was defined in these studies. This is an issue with which researchers, policy makers, and government agencies have struggled. Kaylen and Pridemore (2003, p. 920) note this concern in their own research:

"...definitions of 'rural' generally, and rural community more specifically, need to be more carefully considered. For example, neighbourhoods make sense as a unit of analysis in urban areas because social processes occur at this level and physical and social boundaries are fairly well defined. However, there is not currently an agreed upon definition of rural community. The units of analysis currently utilized—postcode sectors in this study and counties in many US studies—tend to be selected due to availability more so than their ability to represent rural community."

Among these 121 articles the most common approach was to not define rural at all. In three quarters of the studies (74.4%) the authors gave no specific measure of rural but used such vague descriptions as “a rural part of the country” or “rural villages.” For some crimes this made logical sense, such as agricultural crimes or some wildlife crimes, depending on where in the process the research focused its attention. But these represented a minority of cases. Agricultural crimes, for example, were the focus of only 10.7 percent of the studies. Where more precise definitions were given they were based on either an established government classification (13.2%) or a specified population size or density (12.4%).

### **Type of Crime**

As Table 1 shows, the research covered a variety of crime types, with a particular focus on crime in general and on violent crime. The least studied type of rural crime was property crime (not including agricultural crime), which accounted for only three of the 121 studies. Not every paper focused on a crime that fit neatly into one of these more conventional categories. Eleven of the articles focused on other types of crime, and the range of crime types represented in these articles demonstrates the value of looking beyond the boundaries of the United States. Among these “other” crimes were three studies of wildlife crime (Ceccato and Uittenbogaard, 2013; Kahler and Gore, 2012; Pires and Clarke, 2012) and one study each of software piracy (Goel and Nelson, 2009), illegal deforestation (Boekhout, 2010), unlicensed drivers (McDowell et al., 2009), dog fighting (Smith, 2011), fear of crime (Schuermans, 2010), the illegal harvesting of firewood (van Kempen et al., 2009), land theft (White, 2012), and illegal enterprises in general (McElwee et al., 2011).

**Table 1: Type of Crime Studied**

<b>Type of Crime</b>	<b>Number of Studies</b>	<b>Percent</b>
General/Multiple Types	29	24.0
Violent	26	21.5
Domestic Violence	22	18.2
Agricultural/Farm	13	10.7
Alcohol/Drugs	10	8.3
Sex Offenses	7	5.8
Property	3	2.5
Other	11	9.1
Total	121	100%

## Comparing Rural and Urban

Only 34 (28%) of the articles made comparisons between urban and rural. Of those articles 10 reported lower incidents in rural areas, 7 reported no difference, and 13 reported higher crime rates in rural areas. Four studies reported mixed results. For example, Baciú's (2012) study of child abuse in Romania found higher rates for emotional abuse in urban areas but higher rates for physical abuse in rural areas. Similarly, Biermann et al.'s (2011) study of offending and victimization by the elderly in Germany reported that urban elderly were less likely than rural to be offenders but were more likely to be victims.

## Methods Used

Most studies (75.2%) used only one method, although 17 studies (14.1%) combined three or more methods. Table 2 shows, the most common method was original survey research (31.4%), followed by qualitative methods (19.0 %) and then in equal amounts by utilizing existing police/court data (16.5%) and other existing data, such as government sponsored surveys of health (16.5%).

**Table 2: Methodology Used**

Type of Crime	Number of Studies	Percent
Survey Research	38	31.4
Qualitative Research	23	19.0
Police/Court Data	20	16.5
Other Existing Data	20	16.5
Literature Review	7	5.8
Historical	5	4.1
Case Study	1	.8
Experimental/Quasi-Experimental	1	.8
Content Analysis	1	.8
Other	5	4.1
Total	121	100%

The "other" category included interviews with visitors to a rural clinic for HIV (Birdthistle et al. 2013), a feminist analysis of honor killings (Sev'er and Yurdakul 2001), a discussion of the various methodologies that might be appropriate for the study of rural crime (Bell and Hall, 2007), a theoretical discussion of illegal rural entrepreneurship (McElwee, Smith, and Somerville 2011), and a general discussion of trends in the theft of livestock and farm machinery (Jones 2012).

## Theory

Most studies were not guided by theory (76.0%). Of the 29 studies utilizing a theory, the most common theory was routine activities (n=8), social disorganization (n=5), and theories based on gender differences (n=4). There were 6 articles categorized as “Other.” These included a range of approaches, some perhaps more a perspective than a theory, but a perspective that organized the study. These included authoritarian personality theory (Norris and Reeves 2013), circle theory from the field of geography (Kocsis, Cooksey, Irwin and Allen 2002), marginalization of the poor (Juska and Paulikas 2006), dowry violence and noncooperative model of bargaining and signaling (Bloch and Rao 2002), theorizing illicit rural enterprises (McElwee, Smith, and Somerville 2011), and social capital (Woodhouse, 2006).

## Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. Missing from this strategy are rural books and book chapters (e.g., Mawby and Yarwood 2011). The study goes no farther back than 2000, omitting some potentially important research conducted in the 1990s and earlier. The study also limits its focus to rural crime, omitting the many interesting studies of rural criminal justice. Finally, the research includes only English language articles.

## Conclusions

The picture painted in this systematic review is of a subject still in its developmental stages. Theory was applied in only about a quarter of the studies. The bulk of the research is descriptive and the relatively frequent use of qualitative methods suggests the basic landscape of rural crime internationally is still being plotted. There are signs that the topic is increasingly recognized as worthy of study. Over the 15 years of articles included in this study, almost 40 percent were published in the last 3 and one half years. Although it was only begun in 2011, *The International Journal of Rural Criminology* yielded the second highest number of articles in this study. Further, 2014 marked the beginning of the *International Journal of Rural Law and Policy*. Although too new to have contributed articles for this study, the journal holds promise as an important outlet for future research.

There are other signs that the subject is in the early stages of study. One sign is that most (74%) studies fail to specifically define rural, or to even make an attempt at definition. This is not a new problem but is one that may be even more complicated when applied internationally. Another sign is to describe rural crime without comparing it to urban crime in the same country. Such a comparison only occurred 28 percent of the time. Without some point of comparison it is difficult to determine whether rural crime is in fact distinct.



Finally, there was a lack of comparison across countries. Only five studies used global data sets. This was not surprising given the problems associated with trying to have comparable measures and a comparable quality of data across a large number of countries. What was surprising was that only one study (Jobs 2006) compared rural conditions across two countries (Australia with Pakistan).

The study of rural crime has the potential to broaden our understanding of crime in general and that potential is only enhanced by conducting studies of rural crime in a range of countries. This systematic review suggests that important inroads are being made into a better understanding of rural crime from a global perspective.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology November 20, 2014 in San Francisco, California.

<sup>2</sup>My search does not include three special issues on rural crime, including *Southern Rural Sociology* (now, *the Journal of Rural Social Sciences*) (No 2, 2008, Volume 23), *Critical Criminology* (March, 2014 issue, Volume 22) and the *Journal of Rural Studies* (June, 2015, Volume 39). The JRS issue was based on a rural crime conference organized by Vania Ceccato, who is an Associate Professor at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Stockholm, Sweden. The conference was held in September, 2014.

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## Appendix A: 121 International References about Rural Crime

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